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QI Panel:

Book Talk – The Showman: Inside the Invasion That Shook the World and Made a Leader of Volodymyr Zelensky

March 14, 2024
3:00-4:00 PM EST

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 0:35

Okay, looks like we are ready to begin. My name is Kelley Vlahos and I am a senior advisor at the Quincy Institute and editorial director of our online magazine responsible statecraft. I am truly honored to be engaging in this very special conversation with author Simon Schuster on his book the showman inside the invasion that shook the world and made a leader out of wool below to more Solinsky we are joined by my Quincy Institute colleague Mark Episkopos, who initiated this discussion in an attempt to cast more light on one of the most intriguing wartime leaders of the 21st century. As you may know, Schuster's work as a senior correspondent for Time Magazine, has put him in the front seat of the history of the Russian invasion and the war in Ukraine. He has accompanying accompanied the Ukrainian president on and off in country since his 2019 presidential campaign, and before and after the 2022 invasion, and has cultivated rare insights into what motivates this former entertainer, turned politician and statesman, and the fate that might be in store for him today. Schuster's book was released earlier this year, at a time when Zelensky was and is struggling for Western support, and against them bold and emboldened Russian military in the country. Zelensky's ability to command audiences and shape the world shape the world messaging has become more of a challenge for him, at least since the time Time Magazine named him Person of the Year in 2022. Yet Zelensky seems confident as ever, at least in his public pronouncements that Russia's forces could be expelled from Ukraine if Kyiv could get the ramped up support from the US and Europe that it requires. We are looking forward to Simon's insights on the man how he is interacting with the roiling dynamics of the War and world support and the increasing challenges he faces at home in our talk today.

But first, let me introduce our discussants a little bit more formally. Simon has reported from Russia and Ukraine for 17 years, most of that time as a staff writer for Time magazine. His coverage of the war in Ukraine actually began in 2014 when he was the first foreign journalist to arrive in Crimea. As Russian troops took over the peninsula, and 2019. He met and interviewed Zelensky for a profile of his presidential campaign, then continued covering his administration in the years that followed, first traveling to the warzone with the President and April 2021, as the Russians gathered their armies at the border. When the invasion began, Simon has spent months embedded with Zelensky's team securing unparalleled access to their compound and Kyiv where he will wrote the showman. Mark Episkopos, my colleague, is a word research fellow at the Quincy Institute's Eurasia program. He is also an adjunct professor of history at Marymount University. He holds a PhD in history from American University. And he writes pretty

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extensively for Responsible statecraft and was previously the national security reporter for the national interest, where he wrote widely on military and foreign affairs topics.

So thank you so much, Simon, for joining us today and for your book, which is filled with genuine insight and empathy. The fact that you had been covering Ukraine since 2009, and Zelensky since his presidential campaign in 2019, and had spent so much time with him in the years and months before the invasion and after gives a real unique picture of who Zelenski is and how he has responded in real time to the political and security events unfolding in his beloved country. The amount of detail and scene setting of that time period is invaluable. And I really recommend to all of our listeners here today to pick up a copy or download to kindle or audible because Simon was clearly the best place reporter to write this story and he does it with a ton of sensitivity, color and very forthright prose. So with that, I'm going to launch into my first question and then hand it over. or to mark. But Simon in the prologue of the book, you describe the showman that Zelensky had become as stubborn, confident, vengeful and politic, brave to the point of recklessness, resistance to pressure and sparing towards those who stood in his way. He channeled the anger and resilience of his people and expressed it with clarity and purpose to the world and quote, the books chronology ends on a high point the Ukrainian recapture of her son in the fall of 2022 and Zelensky's surprise visit to Washington and glory really, just before Christmas that year, about the same time you wrote the 2022 Time Person of the Year cover story, which was built on your travels with Zelensky during the war, in particular to her son after the victory there. But a lot has happened since then. And the Time article you wrote in November 2023, served as a stark contrast that articles description of an increasingly isolated Zelensky amid changing realities on the ground seem to get the most attention, particularly this passage. But his convictions haven't changed despite the recent setbacks on the battlefield. He does not intend to give up fighting or to sue for any kind of peace. On the contrary, his belief in Ukraine's ultimate victory over Russia has hardened into a form that worries some of his advisers. It is unmoveable verging on the Messianic quote, he deludes himself, one of his closest aides tells me in frustration, we're out of options. We're not winning, but try telling him that Zelensky's stubbornness, some of his aides say has hurt his team's efforts to come up with a new strategy, a new message. So I'm curious, can you talk a little bit more about Zelensky's disposition today as a leader and defender of his country, compared to 2022? Are those attributes described at the beginning of the showman still work in his favor? Has he lost touch with that ability to quote, harness the anger and resilience of his people and turn it into positive motivation? And then for a follow up, how do you think he's handling what seemed to be a more cold shoulder he was getting from Washington, when he last traveled here in December.

Simon Shuster 7:26

Wow, yeah, that's a lot to take on. First of all, thank you so much, Kelley, for that really kind introduction, I'm so gratified and thrilled to hear that you found the book so interesting and valuable. And thank you for hosting me here today. So that's, let me try to take take your question, piece by piece. So I think you're right that the story in there was published in the fall of 2023, reads quite differently than the, for example, Person of the Year profile in December 2022.

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And that's because the context changed. It's not because the leader changed. I felt comfortable ending the book at the point that I did in December 2022. Because I write in the in the epilogue, and one of the final pages that Zelensky's transformation into a wartime leader felt to me complete, it felt to me from observing him for so long, over a number of years that he had finished his transformation into the kind of leader we would continue to see. As the war continued, obviously, the war grinds on but I think, at least in that point, in choosing to end the book, at the end of his transformation into a wartime leader, that his his you know, the reality of his leadership has borne that out, he has indeed remained consistent, very consistent in his message in his stubbornness, in his resolve and his resilience. And I think, I don't know I I think that is what you want. In a wartime leader. You know, this, this one adviser that you quoted, I think you're right, that that paragraph got a lot of attention. There were some other kind of quotes and pieces of that story that were pulled out. Sometimes, you know, really put under a microscope and dissected. I would urge our listeners here today to if you're interested in in that piece to read that piece in full. You know it that is that is one quote one perspective of one advisor who felt that Zelensky was not adjusting fast enough to the realities on the ground, that his message was was stubbornly consistent in promising the Ukrainian people coming victory that you know, as he was president Zelesnky's often put it at that time, 2024 would be the year of Ukrainian victory. So some of his advisers were getting well, okay, let me put it this way, the entire presidential administration at that time we're talking about the fall of 2023 was already learning from the military commanders that the counter offensive would not lead to a breakthrough that it was not proceeding toward victory as hoped and planned. They were getting that information in closed briefings with the generals. We later after the publication of my article a few days later, learned about the condition on the front lines the existence of what appeared to be a stalemate. We learned that from generals illusion at the head of the armed forces in his interview and essay published in The Economist, but they were getting all this information at the time, and they were trying to process it, to figure out how to adjust their message to the new reality on the battlefield.

And I think my article is, as any magazine article is, a snapshot of a period in time. Looking back now with six months hindsight, it was, I would say the low point, because they were simultaneously getting these very worrying and disheartening signals from their generals who were saying, Mr. President, we cannot deliver the victory you are promising to the people on on on the in the counter offensive. It's not there, as General Zaluzhny put it, there will be no big and beautiful breakthrough. At the same time, President Zelensky had just visited Washington, where he came face to face with the Republicans on Capitol Hill, who were who were making clear to him that they intended to resist the continuation of American aid to Ukraine. So this was a very, very difficult moment when they needed to face some harsh realities. And what was going on there at that time, was that some of his aides were in urging zolecki And this was not a majority of the aides but but some of them including the one that you quoted there. Were urging them to adjust the message. And Zelensky was stubbornly saying, No, we must keep pushing toward victory. We have no get get the results. And I think, you know, it's a value judgment. It's not my place to really assess, but I don't judge him harshly in that article or as a person for that position. I think that doggedness is indeed required of a wartime leader in his position to keep pushing keep demanding victory even when some of his advisors are losing heart. Some of

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them are falling into some alarmism or, or depression to pick his team up and say no, we have to keep going. We have to keep fighting. That is a very easy thing to do certainly the war time Zelensky, kind of at the end of his transformation. So I hope I've gotten this answered some some of the questions if I if I've missed something, please, please remind me of an aspect of the question I may have missed.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 13:14

Just that quickly, in terms of my follow up, and I don't know if you can answer this question. I don't know how much you are in contact with him today, like how much reporting you're doing, similar to what you were doing before, where you had the direct access. If so, has his disposition changed? As he seems confident today, given the conditions are much different in terms of the world support, the Republicans are saying we're not giving you any more money? Attention has been shifted to Gaza. Can you shed any light on that?

Simon Shuster 13:50

Yeah. So um, for sure. I mean, I I have not visited Ukraine in a long time. So since October, when I wrote that piece, just because for the last six months, I've been the release of the book. And then kind of, you know, I've been on book tour and giving talks and you know, yeah, traveling a lot for that whole process. I hope to go back in April. But in the meantime, I have been communicating with with the administration, by following and through texts of staying in touch with them. I have published a number of pieces this year earlier this year, including one that delves into how indeed, the President and his team have adjusted their strategy and their messaging, their wartime strategy, in response to those difficulties, those challenges that I described in the fall. Then in January, we had we had a detailed piece about one of the ways that they have found to to adjust, but to more directly answer your question. Yes, he is. He is very confident but I think in listening to his speeches now, and I'm careful for the listener to his words, they have adjusted the message, those things that we were talking about back in the fall, they were sort of they were looking for a way to essentially, you know, present a new set of narratives, a new set of messages to the people that would that would not shock them too much. You know, it's a communications strategy. It's a communications challenge. They were struggling with it, then I have since seen it appearing, the kinds of the things that the President chooses to emphasize the things he talks about in his speeches, it has changed. He does talk more about the importance of seeking adjust peace, He does emphasize more of his his very interesting and very important and very under reported peace plan, the peace formula that he and his team have been working on since November of 2022. We can talk more about that later if you'd like. But his message, he has adjusted his message, I wouldn't say that his confidence has flagged. But here and when we're talking about the last six months, I've only observed him the same way I think all of you have through the screen. I haven't spoken to him directly since then. But the he and the team are certainly soldiering on looking for new ways to, to attack to remind the world that Ukraine is winning that Ukraine is victory is is coming. There are challenges, but they are always looking for new ways to attack the Russians to push them back. And all of that is playing out day to day. I mean, certainly his diplomatic marathon runs on non

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stop in terms of reminding and pushing international partners and people around the world to continue supporting Ukraine. Yeah, I mean, when I talked to him last back in October, he told me how exhausting that is. And that's another important passage, quote from the article that you mentioned from the fall of 2023, where he describes men he's saying it's imagine how hard it is to keep, you know, as, as he, as he put it, as war fatigue rolls along, like a wave across Europe and America. He has to he has to push it back. And that is a very exhausting and difficult job. constantly reminding people and showing people that no Ukraine is winning, not maybe in this dimension of the battlefield, but say in the Black Sea, or in its development of drone technologies that are hurting Russian infrastructure far behind the front line far behind enemy lines. So so to keep making these arguments is his big challenge. And he's he's doing it, I think as stubbornly and as doggedly as ever.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 17:39

Thanks, Simon. Just want to remind the audience if you have any questions for the panel for Simon, please put them in the q&a at the bottom of the screen. We'll try to get to as many as we can, if we can, because I know that Mark has a bunch of questions teed up, so I'm going to hand this over to him.

Mark Episkopos 17:59

Thanks, Kelley. And congratulations, Simon on the book. I'm thrilled to be here to be able to discuss some of its themes with you today. Just to pick up on on the theme of Zelensky as a wartime leader Zelensky rose to the moment after the invasion of February 2022. In ways that few thought he would. And the book does a wonderful job of outlining the strident, uncompromising qualities that have made him such an effective wartime leader. And you mentioned this in your response to Kelley. But how do you think these qualities reflect on his ability to handle the conflicts eventual end? To what extent is his signature combative style, including his explicit refusal to countenance negotiations with Putin's Russia? To what extent is this a liability when it comes to what may be a complex and difficult war termination process?

Simon Shuster 19:04

Yeah, thank you for the question. It's easy to read your position on the answer from the way you frame the question. But okay, let me let me take it piece by piece. I want to I want to stress that the idea that the Zelensky is somehow refusing negotiations are refusing to participate in a peace process is just not true. Unfortunately, the the the peace process and the peace formula that he has been working on that he and his team have been working on, is poorly understood. It's underreported. I think the main reason for that, honestly, is just the events around Ukraine are so fast moving dynamic, tragic and intense that the flow of news out of Ukraine is so intense that many journalists, reporters, observers don't have enough bandwidth to really pay attention to this, this kind of slow diplomatic process, but I want to just take a minute to describe it. So, at the G 20 summit in Bali in November of 2022. President Zelensky presented this 10 Point peace plan, ever since then, his chief of staff Andre Yermak, and a number of officials from the foreign

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ministry and the presidential administration have been working on the implementation of this 10 Point peace plan. And they've been doing it in a way that I think is very methodical, quite mature in its approach to international diplomacy, and clever. So what they're doing is they're sort of setting the table or building the architecture for a possible future peace plan. One that was one in which Ukraine is kind of at the rains, and they're also bringing in dozens of partner countries, guarantors, grantor countries who commit to, well, among other things, ensuring that any agreements reached in a possible future peace process are Biden by. So the real underlying problem with the idea of negotiating with the Russians today, generally speaking, but especially among the administration, and key if there is no trust in the Russians, there is no trust in anything Putin says. There is no trust in any piece of paper he signs. So it's Zelensky and his team understand that in approaching a peace process, they need mechanisms that will guarantee and ensure that the things that Russia agrees to in a possible future peace, peace negotiation, that those things will not be thrown out the window the next day. And the way they're doing that is clever. So they're bringing in partner countries. There, I've lost count now, but it's more than 50, I think is now more than 60, mostly European and kind of West Western democracies. But in one of the important negotiating rounds of this peace formula. in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, the Chinese delegation also participated. So they are also kind of dipping their foot into this process. So I don't want to go too deeply into it, we can spend a whole hour talking about the peace formula, but I just want to push back on the notion that Zelensky is somehow has rejected the idea of peace. That is not true. His administration is working very hard on this, but they don't want to get sucked into a peace process, which Russia controls or which is somehow dictated to them by outside powers, they want to be in control of the process of the kind of architecture of the peace talks.

So I think, I mean, in his in his approach to negotiation is also kind of another another point in your question. So he has issued this decree, it's a presidential decree, I think it's number 679. In case anyone wants to look it up, it's explicitly forbids negotiations with Vladimir Putin. It allows for the negotiations with Russia. But it forbids negotiations with Putin. I described this moment in the book of why Zelensky issued this decree. It was in response, you know, to some horrific actions by the Russians. I don't want to go into too much detail, but that that alarmed observers in the west and some of Ukraine's partners because, you know, they it looked like Lenski was cutting off a channel of negotiations that some western partners wanted to pursue. They want they envisioned, trying to make Solinsky sit down with Putin. I think, you know, we can get into that. But I think fundamentally he was is Kelly that that that passage you quoted channeling the anger and the feelings of the Ukrainian people in that action. That's something he does very effectively. And I think in his approach to the idea of negotiations, especially in negotiations that in any way countenance, trading land for peace, He is following the will of the Ukrainian people, very consistently, polling in Ukraine has shown that nobody, okay, nobody, but the vast majority of Ukrainians are not ready to trade land for peace. And he is going by the will of the people. If in some hypothetical future scenario, the will of the people on that question changes. I do think that Zelensky will adjust that that has been quite consistent. He is responsive to the will of the people and he does try to channel what he understands to be the position of the majority of Ukrainians insofar as he can feel it, he can sense it, and he can see it in the polling. So I don't think he's dogmatic on that point to really at any point, he's quite flexible. He's quite agile. And I

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think that he would adjust as circumstances required or the made made a different approach. appropriate. So I don't think he's dogmatic or inflexible is your question seems to seem to suggest.

Mark Episkopos 25:08

But thanks for that in depth and very thoughtful reply, and I in no need. So wanted to wanted to suggest that Zelensky is completely inflexible, although, I mean, if you look at the points and I don't want to spend a whole hour on this, I really would much rather talk about the fascinating themes in your book. But I mean, if I can ask just a really quick follow up. One of the core points in the piece formula that you mentioned, and you very rightly mentioned, Zelensky, has been lobbying for a very effectively, since four years now, is the expulsion or withdrawal of Russian troops from all Ukrainian internationally recognized Ukrainian territory? And I mean, that seems to be a very difficult aim to realize, especially given where we're at where the war currently stands in terms of the battlefield dynamics. Now, you mentioned that Zelensky has flexibility. And I agree that he does, but do you think he'd be flexible on this point? On the issue of the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory, especially Crimea, which seems, frankly, very difficult to imagine, in the context of where the wars today?

Simon Shuster 26:22

It's difficult for you to imagine, I'm not sure it's so difficult for me to imagine. I mean, I remember talking to President Zelensky about this. He thinks about it in a number of ways. You know, the dynamics on the battlefield are dependent on you know, a number of factors. One very important one is the level of international support. And the weapons coming in. Another factor is Ukraine's ability to produce more of its own weapons. Another factor is its ability to recruit more soldiers to fight the war. But yes, all of all of these kinds of battlefield military strategic issues are going to determine to a large extent, the future of any peace process. So one thing I want to I want to highlight is I think it was just today, maybe yesterday, Dmitry Medvedev, former Russian president, and now chairman of the ruling party in Russia and deputy head of the Russian Security Council. So a very senior official, he gave a response to the peace formula, which I thought was just, I mean, typical of innovative but just nauseatingly sick. I mean, he he said in response to the to the to the peace formula that oh, are starting negotiate, if you want to talk about negotiations are starting negotiation position is that Ukraine should basically be wiped off the map, that it should cease to exist as a country and be fully absorbed in its entirety into Russia. Okay, is that easy for you to imagine mark as a starting negotiating position? So Russia cannot attain that. But that is that is what the Russians are saying that is their goal. That is their war goal. And Medvedev has made this twisted statement in the context of talking about peace negotiations. Is that easy for you to imagine, absorbing all of Ukraine? Is that easier for you to imagine, then that Ukraine kicking the Russians out of Crimea? I don't know. We'll see how the war goes. It will depend on the struggle on the battlefield. As all negotiations do, it depends on where things stand in the fighting. I am not by any means ready to count the Ukrainians or the Ukrainian armed forces out of this fight. I think if you look at the longer arc of this war over the last two years, and not only in the last few months, the Ukrainians have consistently surprised

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us. I think they were on the verge of losing their entire country in March of 2022. But look where we are now. So I wouldn't count them out. I wouldn't say that it's impossible to imagine militarily kicking the Russians out of out of Crimea or the occupied regions of the Donbass. We'll have to see, but it depends on how much aid Ukraine is able to secure and how many weapons they're able to produce, and how many soldiers they're able to recruit all difficult challenges. But the Ukrainians have surprised this before.

Mark Episkopos 29:21

Well, I want to come back to the present day shortly. But I mean, one of the books, great achievements, and what it does really well is that it starts not on February 24 2022, but that discusses sort of the background of the war and I think, very revealing ways. And the historian and me can't resist asking a more question centered on historical interpretation. You you describe in the book what a profound impression of a lot of Lewinsky's grandfather in his stories of World War Two or as it's known in Russia, and some neighboring countries, the Great Patriotic War had on him as a young man And this is particularly interesting because as you know, memory of the war has become a major ideological pillar of Vladimir Putin is Russia, and is used by Moscow as a central justification for Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the de nazification claim. At the same time Ukrainians have also appealed to World War Two, his legacy, they have juxtaposed the invading Russian forces, with the Germans, comparing them to the Nazis. And Ukraine's parliament has formally recognized Russia as a kind of fascist country. Right racism as an as the official ideology of Russia. And some Ukrainians are calling this war, their own country's Great Patriotic War. So I wonder if you could elaborate on Zelensky's view of history, the significance of World War Two and his broader thinking around what's going on in Ukraine today? And also even his sense of his own place in history, in the midst of what is the most destructive and dangerous war in Europe since 1945?

Simon Shuster 31:08

Well, yeah, thank you. That is a very big question. And there are so many directions I could take it from. I mean, in my conversations with President Zelensky. It's kind of a an aspect of his character that I learned over time. He's not the philosopher king. He doesn't sit there and reflect on these big questions of, oh, my place in history and my legacy and all these things. He's very grounded. He's very focused on the moment, his kind of time horizon in reflecting on events is relatively short. I mean, it's what can we get done today, this week, next week. And in our conversations, I did try to pull out of him some some reflections on kind of world history and World War Two and, and all these things that we got there. But it's, I just want to just remark that that's not generally the way conversations with him go. He's He's, he's a man of the immediate moment, and not historical reflection. But we did, we did have some conversations about that, that were very illuminating. And I've described them in the book. You know, he over time recognized and this was a long evolution for him that I sort of described in the book over over the chapters. But he the position he came to is that Ukraine has been in a position of being kicked around by empires for far too long. And he means the Nazis and their occupation during World War Two, he means that the Soviet before that the Soviet, the Holodomor, the, the man

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made famine, the genocidal famine that Joseph Stalin imposed on the Ukrainians and killed at least 3 million people in Ukraine with this man made famine in the 1930s. So he puts this into a kind of continuum of historical events that not Ukraine down to knock the wind out of the nation. And he sees it as His purpose, His goal, fundamentally in history, and in this war, to end that cycle of oppression, to end to give Ukraine agency in deciding its own fate, its own future, and to no longer be a pawn on the chessboard of empirical excuse me, Imperial games of empires, including the United States, Russia, the Europeans, China, whatever, that that Ukraine must have, its be able to decide its own future. That is the lesson that he takes takes from history broadly, that it's enough of these, you know, acts of Imperial aggression and subjugation of Ukraine.

So that's, that's the lesson he takes. It was a long time to get there. Because his view, as I described in the book of the Soviet past, used to be very different when he was an entertainer. And he was working a lot in Moscow, and growing up in a Russian speaking household in eastern Ukraine and a working class industrial town. His attitudes and his beliefs about the Soviet Union were much more positive. It was it was quite a long and difficult transition for him to realize over time, first of all, in learning about the whole demore and now as president and now the leader of a war of a country at war, you know, to recognize that that cycle of oppression and to sort of re imagine or to change his perspective on the historical past, but so I think that's what comes to mind when when when I hear your question, there's a lot more we can we can say about it, but I hope I've at least given you some kind of answer there.

Mark Episkopos 34:45

I think that's great. There's much more of course to say on the history and it's very complex and but alas or our time is limited. I wanted to quickly ask, because your book does spend a significant amount of time discussing the piece process prior to 2022, prior to the full scale Russian invasion as just I wanted to get your general sense of the Minsk agreements because as bitter a pill as the Minsk agreements were for Ukraine, the events that followed on February 22, February 24 2022, were, of course, horrific, Zelensky downplayed the possibility of a full scale Russian invasion until the last moment and you dwell on sort of the reasons for why that might be in the book. But I mean, if Solinsky knew that this was an inevitability, a full scale Russian invasion, with the horrific human toll that entails, do you think he would have tried to implement the Minsk two platform more forcefully despite the political costs? And to him, and what I think are Ukraine's legitimate reservations about some of the points in the Minsk agreement?

Simon Shuster 36:04

Yeah, I see, I see what you're getting at. So you're asking me to imagine a sort of hypothetical reality in which Zelensky had some foreknowledge of his of the way that events would play out in the future? I mean, incidentally, I did have a conversation with him about this. It was it was in the context of kind of a more philosophical or broader question about his regrets and regrets that he may have looking, looking back to before the invasion, and so on. He said he didn't have

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any. And the reason is that you, you are guided by the lights you have in the moment in which you make a decision. So he was working on the information available to him then. And then going back and studying these kinds of turning points in the history of relationship, the history of between Russia and Ukraine, the history of the war, the role of the West and all this, the Minsk agreements and how they were signed and why and how they went to right. It's a very complicated history. But one thing I learned to be very humble about is not to use hindsight too liberally. Hindsight is it's easy to judge people based on the hindsight of you know, that's, that's, of course, 2020. But what I tried to do in the book is show what was the information? What were the arguments for and against what was what were the positions? What were the available facts on the ground at the time that led Zelensky or other figures described in the book to make this or that decision? I don't, and I'm very, I try to be very modest and humble about not imagining alternative realities. So my job as a journalist, and my job in this book was to chronicle the reality we have and how we came to it. But not to imagine hypothetical realities, or were prognosticate about future realities.

I think the reality we have is interesting enough and important enough to dissect and understand. So I, I don't I can't really take your question directly, because it's just, it's sort of, you know, analysts, you know, historians can go back and parse with the benefit of hindsight, what should or could have been done? I totally understand why Zelensky did what he did in the negotiations with with Russia over the implementation of the Minsk agreements in 2020, and 2021. He gave it a hell of a shot. He came into the presidency in his very first speech, his inaugural speech on in May of 2019. He said, he said, his first priority will be to end war in the Donbass. And that, of course, meant figuring out a way, figuring out a way that Ukraine could implement the Minsk roadmap toward peace in a way that was not self destructive for Ukraine in a way that did not create a poison pill. Inside Ukrainian politics inside Ukraine's political life, a poison pill for Ukraine's ambitions of joining the European Union, and potentially joining NATO. He wanted to find that balance. He wanted to look Putin in the eyes and see if you could find some humanity or pragmatism and Putin that he could he could maybe meet him halfway, he was ready to make dramatic concessions to meet Putin halfway but Putin was was not put in never really took those negotiations all that seriously from from my research and what I was what I was able to glean from talking to direct participants in that process. So I described that process, you're right, you know, quite quite in some detail. But what I don't do is take a detour into Hey, If this alternative decision had been made, then maybe this would have happened. I don't know. Nobody knows. I described what happened But and why it happened, but but not alternatives of what might have happened.

Mark Episkopos 40:06

So, so just if I, if I can understand this, and I appreciate your explanation of this, but on the reality on the ground as it was facing Zelensky and people in his in his top official top Ukrainian officials, what what was it that caused the Minsk agreements not not to be implemented, was at Russia's strict insistence that the agreements be followed to the letter, despite the fact that some provisions of Minsk were obviously impossible to realize in the way that they were phrased, was a domestic political concerns in Ukraine, was their concerns, perhaps about sort

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of the hard nationalist wing in Ukrainian politics, in their reservations about the reintegration of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions? So could you perhaps elaborate on what exactly the discussions were in Ukraine at the time around Minsk and what the the forces that ultimately propelled the next failure?

Simon Shuster 41:19

Yeah, um, well, I think the key friction point in the negotiations that Zelensky initiated with Putin in 2019, and that played out over the course of that year and then into 2020. The key there are many points of contention, but I think the one that's that's very important to understand is the idea of holding elections in the occupied parts of the Donbass that would allow the people there to, to elect leaders that the the Ukrainian government and the international community would recognize as legitimate representatives of those territories, let the Donbass vote. To put it very crudely as Zelensky early in his administration wanted to do that. He made a number of overtures, he attempted to reach out to them, he attempted to get money out of out of the parliament to pay pensions in these regions, he built roads to an open path pathways for people to be able to leave those occupied territories and visit visit other parts of Ukraine. And to sort of as he put it, to come over and see that it's better here, we need to eat, he kept talking about this, and we talked about it at the time. We need to reach these people, we need to we need to bring them home, we need to convince them we need to win their hearts and minds. You know, over time, he became quite frustrated with the intensity of the Russian propaganda Stranglehold over these regions. So we can we can go into that in more detail if you'd like. It's a long story. And the book spends quite a bit of time describing, you know, these efforts in the peace process back then. But that was that was the problem. I mean, they were negotiating over. Okay, how can we get this done? So let's get was really taking a lot of steps. I don't want to get too much into the nitty gritty to lose people. But he was taking dramatic steps and making concessions or offering concessions on this particular point of holding these elections. But the Russians were totally unwilling to budge on the question of okay, the Ukrainians were saying, we can't hold elections, if your troops are occupying these regions, we can't hold elections if there are Russian forces there. If you're in control militarily of the border, so we need a withdrawal of Russian troops before we can hold elections in these territories that will be internationally recognized as free and fair. And the Russians on this point, for example, there are other points too, but on this point, we're not willing to budge. And I think that was a major point of contention. So in the end, the Ukrainians just said that there's just no way we can hold a legitimate election in the context of very intense Russian propaganda saturation in these regions. And, indeed, military occupation of these regions, how are you going to how are you going to hold that vote?

So I think that was that was a really important turning point when when they couldn't come to terms on the possibility and then this the structure of a possible vote in the Donbass like that, that happened in at the end of want to get my dates right here that happened, like in the summer of 2020, or something, or Yes, summer fall of 2020. When that question broke down. There were other points of contention. I mean, you know, I remember talking to one of the key negotiators, Alexei Resnikov of who later became the defense minister. He's now the former defense minister, but at the time he was one of the key negotiators in this process of trying to

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make Minsk workable. And it is interesting the way he described it is very comfortable conversationalist and his his, his perspective was invaluable to me in writing the book he described you know, there are points in Minsk, if you read it carefully that are just obviously outdated. For example, one point in Minsk Two calls on Ukraine to amend its constitution to grant, I think, I believe is to grant more autonomy to the occupied regions of the Donbass by the end of 2015. There's a date there, there's a deadline. So and these negotiations now were happening in 2020 five years later, so that date has passed. So Resnikoff remembers suggesting to the Russians, can we amend this obvious outdated point in the Minsk agreements and the Russians, as he put it, we're not willing to change anything about it, not even a comma, not even these very obvious, outdated elements in the agreement. They demanded full implementation on the part of the Ukrainians and they were not willing to implement on their part when it came to withdrawing forces, withdrawing troops, withdrawing military, weapons and so on. So that is, as he put it, you know, one of the points when when the the legal battles just degenerated into a complete deadlock.

Mark Episkopos 46:13

So on on this, if I can maybe probe a little more into domestic politics in Ukraine. One of the books many merits is that it does offer a vivid portrait of Ukrainian political culture in the run up to the Russian invasion. And, as you noted, Zelensky its popularity, domestic popularity, took a real hit during the COVID pandemic, and made Viktor Medvedchuk's opposition party had real prospects of victory for our audience. Viktor Medvedchuk is a Ukrainian politician with ice to the Kremlin and a fairly pro Russian position. He is one of the Ukrainian oligarchs, and he owned several large media platforms in Ukraine and his party. The his opposition party had real prospects of coming to power at one point, you mentioned this in the book, I wanted to ask you about the decision to ban his media empire midview chokes media empire and to expropriate his pipeline, which was his major source of wealth, it You appeared, and correct me if I'm wrong, but less than convinced by Zelensky. His argument for this move, at one point Zelensky said, tells you that, you know, pro Russian politicians were elected, and that pursuing a completely different set of policies from their campaign platform. But I mean, that's hardly legal. Right? And but anyway, so I couldn't help but wonder when reading this chapter, which was aptly called the Dark Prince, if the banning of maybe choke, wasn't, Zelensky is kind of a Machiavellian moment or the point when a public republics ideals come into conflict with the realities of power and the necessity of maintaining order, it kind of point of no return. That set the stage for later restrictions on entities regarded as pro Russian. So what were the implications of banning Viktor Medvedchuk's media conglomerate, especially using an unconventional mechanism, like sanctions, not only for Zelensky but for the direction of Ukrainian democracy?

Simon Shuster 48:29

Yeah, thank you. It's a very important point. And as you say, I I devote a whole chapter and more than more than one chapter to this relationship, the relationship between Medvedchuk and Putin, which is very they're very close friends, Putin is the godfather of Medvedchuk's elder eldest daughter, and the relationship between Medvedchuk and Zelinsky. And indeed, the role

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that he plays in all this, I mean, he's a, he's a very significant figure, and I think poorly understood the role he played, at least in the West, poorly understood, extremely controversial figure in Ukraine. I mean, he's seen as really a demonic force. That's the nickname The Dark Prince among many Ukrainians. So I want to be careful here because, you know, I don't see it as my place to judge this or that decision. I sort of by the President, you know, I present all sides. So I talked, I talked him into the joke, and I present his position. I talked to the landscape admin with Medvedchuk, I present his position and then the criticism of the decision that Zelensky made to to shut down Mr. Medvedchuk's pro Russian media assets, and the sources of financing that were supporting me the jokes political project, that decision I studied very carefully. Because I do think it's important to understand it, but I, I quote, others in criticizing it. So it's not my place to say that it's wrong or right, legal or illegal. It's just I'm a chronicler of the events. I'm not a judge. So I quote one very close ally of President Zelensky, who was actually one of his campaign managers in 2019, when he was running for president against Dimitri Razumkov, who was then the Speaker of the Parliament when this crackdown on metawidget was happening. And I talked to him about it. And he said, this is not legal, we can't do this. So you had just to kind of be more brief about it. You have one of Zelensky is, you know, close allies, political allies, a very senior official Speaker of the Parliament, telling Zelensky you can't do this to a sitting member of parliament as maybe juke was, this is this is extra judicial, this is outside of the law.

So it was when I heard that it was especially important for me to understand why Zelensky had taken such a dramatic step? And I think over the course of the book, the reader gets a sense of it. It's it's very complex, but But fundamentally, to summarize it Zelenskyi saw Victor Medvedchuk's activities as essentially imperial conquest by other means, as a kind of a Trojan horse figure that the Russians were trying to impose on the Ukrainians to to achieve political control or control over Ukraine through corruption, propaganda, and political influence. And he felt it necessary to stop that process. Because again, he saw it as basically conquest by by other means. And that is his position. I mean, he told me once that he sees these these political actors, these pro Russian political actors as devils, that they are a threat to Ukraine's sovereignty. And I think, you know, once the was, again, when I talked to him about these, these events with the hindsight of the full scale invasion, he did not have any regrets. On the contrary, he he felt that Russia had been waging this war. by other means, long before the tanks rolled across the border, it had been waging this war of imperial control for many years, and one of its weapons was made via juke and his propaganda channels, so as alecky had no regrets, and as far as I know, still has no regrets about cracking down. And I think over time, and with the hindsight of the war, I came to understand, where's the Lensky was coming from, in doing that, much more clearly than I did initially, initially is, and as I described in the book, in that part, where I quote, Rosen, COVID ally, criticizing that decision, as extra legal or illegal. I was, I was more confused by that decision on Zelensky, but over time, I came to understand it. And I think a reader of the book would would kind of at least get a deeper sense of why Stilinski did that. But in the long arc, maybe it's not such a long arc in the arc of Zelensky his political career. He's only been in politics for about five years now. That is one of the most controversial decisions that he has made. And it's important to understand it, and it is it is a crucial milestone on the

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road to to where we are today. So I describe it in some detail. And yeah, it's it's a controversial decision, but I understand why Zelensky made it.

Mark Episkopos 53:52

Thanks. I want to turn it back over to Kelly, if she has any closing questions or comments, but I think you I mean, that that's a very in depth and I think, revealing explanation that was the last case approach and how he sees the world. Thank you. Thank you.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 54:07

Thanks, Mark. I actually do have a question, but I wanted to get to at least one from our q&a from Anatol Lieven who is the director of our Eurasia program and Russian historian. Anatol wants to know, to what extent has Zelensky changed his policies in response to pressure from the Ukrainian extreme right, in your judgment, Simon, how much of a threat do they pose to Ukrainian democracy today?

Simon Shuster 54:49

Well, I mean, as, as I think you will, you will know that the far right parties have never had much success in Ukrainian electoral politics, they have consistently lost elections. And or gotten like a few percent, maybe, you know, one or two seats here and there, but they've never been a major force in Ukraine's political life. They have been a force in street politics over the years. And, you know, played played a significant role in the bygone protests and the Maidan revolution in 2014. And also in pressuring Zolotukhin, after he came to power in certain policies, so So Mark, you mentioned this, this point, you know, while Zelensky was negotiating with the Russians, and with Putin, in 2019, and 2020, he was facing a lot of pressure from I mean, I wouldn't say the extreme right wing but but the right wing and to include former President Poroshenko, who made a sharp shift to the right later in his political career. So he was a lot of pressure from from the streets. So there were a lot of protests, large protests, 1000s of people 10s of 1000s of people protesting against what they called capitulation. Right. So giving too much ground to the Russians. And I this was this was a significant factor in Zelensky is in the politics of the time and intellect, his decision making, you know, he had to be responsive to, to, you know, the public and including the large protests he was seeing, including the protests and arguments being presented in Parliament by figures like Poroshenko, who had allied himself with with the right wing more and more. So. So these are, you know, important factors, but I don't think they're as important as is often made out in in some narratives, including Russian narrative, certainly.

But in terms of today, I want to I don't want to give you an answer to your question only from a historical perspectives because you asked about, how influential are they now? I don't know. Again, I try not to prognosticate too much. But I do have the sense that one of the ways after what I hope will be Ukraine's victory in this war, one of the ways that I think Ukrainian politics will evolve, I would expect is some political forces or parties that satisfy the kind of the more military minded wing of the electorate. So a party that grows out of the military, it could be a former

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commander, we saw this to a lesser to an extent after 2014, when you saw these combatants are called these battalion commanders who were suddenly running for parliament. Some of them had right wing views, others didn't. And I think after what I hope will be Ukraine's victory in this war, I think we will see that on a larger scale just because you will have many more military veterans. And generally, society will have been more kind of militarized. There's more of society has participated in the war directly in one way or another, has lost loved ones, and so forth. So I think there will be a demand among society and among voters for some kind of party that represents that set of political needs and positions. I don't think Zelensky is constitutionally or ideologically suited to fill that role very much. I think it wouldn't be some kind of party that emerges from military veterans, military commanders. But I see this as a kind of possible way that Ukrainian politics will play out after, but we're quite far now in the hypothetical, I just want to be humble about that, like I am not a prognosticator. But that seems like a sort of a demand amongst society that is, is currently an unfilled in the political spectrum of available parties and politicians that that could participate in an election. You see what I mean? So I think we will see more likely than not the emergence of some party rooted in the values of the military, you can call those right wing. I don't know that's kind of often have a value judgment. But yeah, I think that is something I would expect in the evolution of Ukrainian politics in the coming years.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 59:42

So Simon, we got about a minute left, but I have to ask, I mean, a lot of the the commentary over the last few months have pointed to an urgency that you're hearing from the White House today. If Solinsky and the Ukrainian military do not get the way weapons, the ammunition the aid to to improve their capabilities and their chances on the battlefield. All will be lost. And there there is there is an apocalyptic tone to that. How do you feel? Because I know that a lot of this is personal for you. You've stated that in the book, do you feel it is as dire as that? And what happens if the Republicans in in Washington are successful and blocking the billions of dollars in aid that Biden is looking for today?

Simon Shuster 1:00:45

Well, the first thing that comes to mind is a conversation I had with president Zelenskyy about this last time we met in person this October of last year, a couple of weeks after he visited Washington and talked to lawmakers on Capitol Hill. They asked him he described a meeting he had a closed door meeting with senators on Capitol Hill, they asked him I believe this question actually came from a Democrat but in any case, there were Republicans in the room too. And Zelensky was asked, what happens if we don't give you the aid? And his answer was quite blunt. He said, We will lose the war. He was that stark about it? I don't think that was alarmism. And you know, he's not one for kind of exaggeration. He's a he's a straight shooter. You asked him a question, he tries to answer it. So that's how he felt. And when I talked to him a couple of weeks later, he recalled that for me in those same stark terms, I don't think that that has changed. So those are the stakes. And then you have to imagine, what what is it you know, what, what does losing the war mean? Does it mean that you have an aggressive revanchist Russia, swallowing up a European democracy and moving its forces right up to NATO territory?

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On the Polish border? Is that something the United States wants? I mean, I don't think so. And the last thing, I'd say, and I know we're really out of time, but when I've talked to the Ukrainians, to the admitted officials in Kyiv, about this, they have a surprising degree of optimism that the Americans will come through. It may be more optimistic than I am. But they see Mike Johnson's position is kind of untenable, that if, if the if Congress is allowed to vote, the aid will come through. And you have this one guy, Mike Johnson holding up the process. It seems like a you know, yeah, untenable position, so we'll have to wait and see, of course, you know, elephant in the room, Donald Trump. But I guess we'll have to leave that elephant for another conversation. Yeah, but But it's dark. I mean, he put it that starkly. I can only quote what he said. If we don't get the aid, we lose the war.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 1:02:54

Well, I'm sorry. We're out of time. Because I know that Mark probably had much more to ask you. But I so much very, I very much appreciate the, the level of detail and candor that you went to on all of these questions in your in your answers for Mark and I. And I just want again to recommend to our audience, the showman inside the invasion that shook the world and made a leader of Iodo more Zelinsky it's an amazing book, and it is available today. Thank you so much, Simon. I just before we leave would like to mention to our audience, that we have another webinar coming up tomorrow at noon, the global south and the Gaza assault. This is going to be a very special conversation, moderated by Trita Parsi, our executive vice president here at Quincy, Sarang Shidore who is the director of the Global South program, Samar al- Bulushi and Filipe Nasser. It's going to be a great conversation, go to our website Quincy Institute.org to get a link for that for noon tomorrow. That's Friday. Thank you, Mark, for your amazing questions. And to our audience. I'm sorry, we didn't get to all of your questions. But I can say this was very well attended and a very provocative and dynamic conversation. So thank you.

Simon Shuster 1:04:24

Thank you, really an honor.